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BELGIUM: Media wrongfully stigmatized and failed to publish the judicial truth (2)

When media wrongfully stigmatize and fail to publish the judicial truth: the case of Jehovah's Witnesses (2)

Le Soir, La Capitale Sud-info, Bruxelles News, Nieuwsblad, VRT Nieuws and Bruzz which had very imprudently reported in

2018-2019, as a breaking news, the alleged failure of the Belgian Jehovah's Witnesses association to report sexual abuse in their midst were the only media outlets to report about the 5th October 2021 court decision dismissing the charges against this religious group. They can be commended for that.

Part I was published on 8 November and is available [here](#)

HRWF (09.11.2021) – *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has identified three well-known TV channels – RTBF, RTL and VRT – and several major newspapers such as *La Libre Belgique*, *La Dernière Heure* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* which have failed to report the dismissal of the case against the association of Jehovah's Witnesses wrongfully suspected of hiding cases of sexual abuse in its midst and holding so-called internal trials, generally favourable to the alleged perpetrators.

The federal prosecutor's office explained that after three years of investigation the case had been dismissed and he was quoted by the daily newspaper *Le Soir* as saying "It is possible that there were facts, but if so, they took place in the intra-family sphere. These facts cannot therefore be attributed to the Jehovah's Witnesses association."

Part II

Act II (2019): The tsunami

Two months and a half after the publication of the CIAOSN report, the issue made the headlines again with the creation of a working group in the House of Representatives which was commissioned to inquire about "the management of sexual abuse on minors inside the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses". The

parliamentary group was presided by André Frédéric, a Socialist MP who is the chairman of a Belgian anticult group named AVISO and quite recently the president of FECRIS, a pan-European anticult organization.

On 12 March 2019, *La Libre Belgique* published a press release of Belga titled "Pedophilia among Jehovah's Witnesses examined by the House of Representatives"[1]. It stressed that according to the CIAOSN report, Jehovah's Witnesses are against pedophilia but "the situation is less clear on the ground".

On 27 March 2019, VRT1, a well-known Flemish Television released a 35-minute investigation program titled "The secret of Jehovah"[2] which dealt with the internal management of sexual issues by the organization of Jehovah's Witnesses in the Flanders and abroad: masturbation, homosexuality, incest, sexual abuse in family and in the community. For their investigation, the journalists talked with victims, former elders and former members of the internal judicial committees. One of them was Patrick Haeck, a co-founder of the anti-cult association *Reclaimed Voices/ Belgium*.

On the next day, the VRT published an article on its website titled "Jehovah's Witnesses' scandal: state intelligence to home in on sects" in which the then Belgian Minister of Justice, Koen Geens (Flemish Christian democrat) was reported to have said to VRT 1 that he wanted "Jehovah's Witnesses wishing to leave the organisation to receive help from the cults' watchdog" (CIAOSN). And he added "I will also ask the secret services to take a closer look at the activity of cults."

On 1 April, RTL, a major francophone TV channel, covered the issue in its evening TV news[3] after having posted two long articles on its website[4].

In the aftermath of the VRT documentary, a series of articles was published in *Fædrelandsvennen*, a major Norwegian newspaper,[5] and by the website of *Avoid Jehovah's Witnesses*[6], run by a former Jehovah's Witness in Ireland.

Act III (2019): The police search of the Belgian Jehovah's Witnesses' headquarters

On 25 April 2019, the Federal Judicial Authorities searched the Belgian headquarters of the Jehovah's Witnesses Association in Kraainem, on the outskirts of Brussels[7].

A spokesperson for the Jehovah's Witnesses then said to Brussels Times: "We attach a great deal of importance to the welfare of children, and invariably report any allegations to the authorities. There is no place within our community for anyone who might carry out such practices."

Conclusions

Sexual abuse on minors is a horrible plague and suspicions of such cases must immediately be reported to the relevant civil authorities for the protection of the minors. The police and secular courts are indeed better equipped to investigate abuse claims than religious and other communities and to identify

the real facts.

Sexual abuse exists in all realms of society, in families as well as in institutions: religious communities, schools, sports centers, summer camps, clubs, and so on.

Sexual abuse on minors has not only happened in a religious institutional setting but also in schools, summer camps and various sports, such as athletics and swimming.

The facts are usually denounced years and decades later when victims are adults. Many cases which have emerged in the last few years date back to the last century where that sort of phenomenon was massively and wrongfully disregarded and silenced by families, society and leaders in charge of institutions. In those times, the police and the judiciary were also failing to take domestic violence into consideration. Times have fortunately changed.

In the last few years, the Roman Catholic Church has been in the eye of the cyclone on this issue. Hundreds of clergymen around the world, even at the highest level, have been convicted and sentenced by courts. Moreover, the Church has been accused of covering up such criminal behaviors and a number of prelates have recognized it. France is the latest example of this tragedy.

The organization of Jehovah's Witnesses is now at the heart of media campaigns in several countries targeting their alleged mishandling of sexual abuse cases they may have been aware of in the past.

In the case of Belgium, a court has declared unfounded the suspicions and the accusations of former embittered members after three years of investigation. A number of mainline media outlets should have been more prudent in their coverage of the report of the CIAOSN, should have double-checked the data and carried out a counter-investigation instead of escalating the stigmatization with catchy headlines day after day.

If such headlines had affected Jewish, Muslim or other religious communities, they would have provoked a general outcry, and rightly so. They would have been assimilated to anti-Semitism, Islamophobia or incitement to hatred towards a religious minority, even if the accusations had been founded. In the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, they were not founded, a judge said, and his decision was not appealed.

The judiciary has professionally dealt with this issue but a number of media outlets have not. In the meantime, moral damage has been committed and the accusations will persist as proven facts in the minds of public opinion as their refutation by a court has dramatically remained either unreported or under-reported by the media in comparison with the magnitude and the intensity of the stigmatization. Moreover, their fake news continue their life on internet, inexorably.

Stereotyping, demonizing, scapegoating and discriminating against religious, ethnic or other human groups are not acceptable in our democratic societies. Justice and restraint must always prevail.

Photo credit: Bitterwinter.org

[1] La Chambre se penche sur la pédophilie au sein des témoins de Jéhovah, La Libre Belgique, 12 March 2019, <https://www.lalibre.be/belgique/politique-belge/la-chambre-se-penche-sur-la-pedophilie-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehovah-5c87cd467b50a60724b42065>.

[2] VRT Eén, Pano, Het Geheim van Jehova (The Secret of Jehovah), YouTube, 3 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPE3akJgkgA>.

[3] Pédophilie au sein des Témoins de Jehova: des victimes brisent le silence et racontent leur calvaire (video), RTL

Info, 1 April 2019,
<https://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/societe/viols-et-agressions-sexuelles-sur-mineurs-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehova-des-victimes-racontent-leur-calvaire-video-1112795.aspx>.

[4] Les cas de pédophilie cachés au sein des Témoins de Jehova pour ne pas salir leur communauté, RTL Info, 1 April 2019,
<https://www.rtl.be/info/belgique/faits-divers/les-cas-de-pedophilie-cachees-au-sein-des-temoins-de-jehovah-pour-ne-pas-salir-leur-communaute-1112611.aspx>.

Les actes pédophiles au sein des Témoins de Jehovah sont dénoncés depuis plus de 30 ans. Pourquoi rien ne semble changer? (video), RTL Info, 1 April 2019,
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[5] Fædrelandsvennen, 2019,
<https://www.fvn.no/nyheter/norgeogverden/i/GG0g4l/-Mannen-hadd-e-innrommet-overgrep-mot-ti-barn-Likevel-fikk-jeg-beskjed-om-a-ikke-ga-til-politiet-med-saken>.

[6] The man had admitted abusing ten children. Still, I was told not to go to the police with the case, 2019,
<https://avoidjw.org/en/news/man-admitted-abusing-10-children/>.

[7] Jehovah's Witnesses headquarters searched, VRT News, 30 April 2019,
<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2019/04/30/jehovahs-witnesses-headquarters-searched/>.

Further reading about FORB in Belgium on HRWF website

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